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Honors English Period A3

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How I Made It to the Moon

I spend every waking moment staring at that wall. That white wall above the furnace that has gotten duller and duller over the years. I remember when they first painted it years ago. I was in this same room then. Years have gone by since then and most of the paint is chipping away now. I can see more of the wall’s bare skin showing through every day.

The buzz of the radio behind me grows louder and I slowly flip onto my other side. I can hear my bones creak as I use every bit of my strength to hoist myself up. I pant quickly, sucking the surrounding air into my worn out lungs. I reach out my hand to turn the dial on the radio. My fingers are no more than thin, fragile bones now. They tremble and shake as I stretch them towards my bedside table. I gently turn the knob, scrolling through the channels of my radio. With each switch comes a new voice and sound from around the world. It amazes me that I am able to receive all of this life without getting out of my bed. In some strange way listening to the laughter and commentary makes me feel more alive, as if somehow I am able to take in all of this life and bottle it up inside of me. I know that’s not the case though. I don’t have too much longer to live. All I can wish for is that they make it in time. There’s no longer any hope of me ever being up there with them, even though it seemed so close at one point.

It was October 7 of 1958 and I had just turned thirty years old. I was a pilot at Bryan Air Force Base, located in eastern Texas. One morning, while I was on my way to clean the jets before the day’s flight, I saw a group of men all huddled together. Each one was pushing forward, trying to get a glimpse at what looked like some kind of list posted on the wall. I tried to stay away from the mob, thinking it was another civil rights dispute that had broken out. Just as I began walking in the opposite direction, my friend Gene tumbled in front of my path.

“David,” he shouted excitedly, “have you seen it?” He wore a dull-green uniform draped over his tall, thin body. His greying flat-top was cut short to his head and covered with a beat up cap. His eyes were wide with enthusiasm as he pointed towards the crowd.

“Seen what?” I responded.

“Over there, on the board! You were chosen! Go take a look!” he turned me around and pointed at the large group of men. I had no idea what he was talking about, but this was the most excited I had ever seen him. I had to go find out what everyone was so thrilled about.

I pushed my way through the tight mass of bodies, fighting my way to the front. I was just barely able to make out the heading. “Man-In-Space Program” it read. I heard voices mumbling around me and tried to pick up what they were saying. The list contained about five-hundred names from across the country, all selected by NASA for a program they were creating. My immediate thought was “why did they choose me?” At the time I knew very little about space travel, but I guess neither did any of the other men around me. I knew how to fly an F-86, but not any kind of rocket like the ones they were using. Despite all of the confusion and denial I was feeling, there was a part of me that longed to give it a try. I could just feel that there had to be something amazing coming and this was my chance to be a part of it. This was my chance to become a part of history.

The generals informed us that our records had been sent over and we would hear from them soon. Weeks went by and I had never been so anxious. I could hardly sleep at night just imagining what kind of excitement lay ahead of me. All of the amazing adventures and discoveries to come. I would look up at the stars and imagine what it would be like to be up there. Surrounded by nothing but darkness, feeling so small in a universe that went on forever.

Three months later, in January, the hundred and ten of us that qualified traveled to Washington D.C. to be interviewed and tested. I arrived at the facility early in the morning. The sun was just coming up over the city and you could hear the faint shouts of men on their way to work. As soon as I pushed open the large, wooden doors at the entrance a short man in a black and white suit shook my hand. The dimples in his cheeks grew deeper as he smiled, puffing up his red face. His large glasses, that he pushed up with his index finger every minute, could barely remain on his nose.

“How ya doin’?” he said loudly as he tightly gripped my palm.

“I’m doing just fine,” I said. I really was happy to be there. I had been waiting for this moment for months now.

“By the looks of it you’re one of the first guys here. There’s a few more waiting down the hall. Here’s your card.” He handed me a small, white card with the letter “A” written on it. I slid it into my back pocket and wandered down the hallway. There I found about ten other men, either sitting on benches or leaning against the wall. Their eyes were narrowed as they skimmed the lines of the newspaper they each held in front of them. I took a seat on the beach and pulled my own paper out of my back pocket. As time went by more and more men crowded into the tight corridor. Soon the hallway became a sea of checkered suit jackets and cigar smoke. A door swung open and I heard the footsteps of a man step out. I couldn’t see him through the crowd, but I heard him call out “Men with the letter ‘A’ on their cards please step inside.”

Half of the men squeezed their way out of the hallway and into a room where they took a seat in the rows of chairs. The walls were painted the color of an egg-shell and a lone American flag stood in the corner. There they told us about what they called the “Mercury Program.” It was a select team of seven men they were putting together to carry out missions involving space travel. They were very specific about the the type of man they wanted on their team.

“All candidates for the program must be under the height of five foot eleven and weigh less than one-hundred and eighty pounds” an older man said to us from the front of the room. He slowly maneuvered his head back and forth as he looked at our faces. He had one hand placed on a table and the other on his walking stick to support his body. Despite his frail structure, he gave off the impression of a pure genius. Every word that came out of his mouth contained immense knowledge and experience. Just after being in the room with him for less than an hour, he already had gained my complete respect. I began to think that if these were the type of men that worked with space exploration, then it was no doubt the group that I needed to join. The more they told us, the more I desired to make it, but of course that wasn’t going to come easily.

The weather was getting warmer. Thirty-two pilots made it on to the next stage of testing and I was one of them. They ended up not even testing the members of Group B because so many men volunteered in the first crowd. I boarded a plane to Albuquerque, New Mexico with no idea what to expect next. That week consisted of hours of physical examinations. I had never ran so much in my life, but for some reason I never felt tired. It seemed as though something was always carrying me along, convincing me to push forward. Honestly, I don’t think I had ever wanted something as bad as I did then. I was willing to do anything.

The strenuous workouts were nothing compared to what we encountered next in Dayton, Ohio. My days within the Wright Air Development Center were complete hell. The tests they put us through were meant to test our psychological and emotional strength. Their goal was to break us. They wanted to see how long we would be able to last in the emptiness of outer space without going insane.

I lay down on the table, the cold metal surface stinging my bare back. Three men stood above me in lab coats. I hated these men more than anything now. Everyday they looked at me with their cold, emotionless eyes like I was some kind of animal. I understood that they were just doing their job, but I couldn’t take it anymore. They pulled harnesses across my chest, restricting all of my motion. A clear roof closed over top of me, leaving me with no control of my body or life.

“It’s just a quick test. It’ll be over before you know it.” the taller man said as though he was reading it off a script. I nodded, acting like none of this bothered me, but on the inside my mind was spinning wildly. I kept trying to calm myself down, but I couldn’t contain myself, I was terrified. I knew that the goal of this test was to see how we would respond in situations of stress or discomfort, so I did everything I could to stop myself from panicking. I began to spin, slowly at first but then faster and faster, until my body felt as though it was going to fly out of the harnesses. I tried to scream but nothing came out of my mouth. All I could do was close my eyes and wait for the torture to come to an end.

These tests went on for weeks. The best part of every day was when I could return to my bed at night. It wasn’t that the beds were comfortable or anything, they really weren’t, it’s just that this was my only time to escape the torture I faced during the day. There were times where I came extremely close to going back home. I missed my old life, where I was free to do whatever I wanted. My mind yearned for the chance to go out dancing again with all the gorgeous doilies that filled the city at night. I missed going ice skating and watching movies on the big screen in the theaters. Now I even missed going to work every day and playing cards with the other men. What kept me there was this hope for the future. That maybe one day I could become the first man to travel into space and witness such amazing beauty. This is what I wanted more than anything.

I pushed open the door and walked out onto the sidewalk. The flashing lights of photographers hit my eyes and their shouts of questions pounded against my ears.

“What does it feel like to become a part of the Mercury Seven?” I heard one ask. I just kept walking. A group of about ten other men followed behind me. Six of them were my fellow astronauts and the others were some of the head members of NASA. The date was April 9, 1959. It was official, I had made it. All the tests and struggles had finally paid off. I could officially call myself an astronaut. My mind was filled with all of the amazing things my future would hold, unaware of all the suffering that would come with it.

The very next day we entered the classroom. We spent countless hours every day learning about rockets, space, astronomy, and other subjects that I never even know existed. The class was taught by one of the most interesting men I have ever met. He knew more than anybody about anything. You could ask him any question and he would give you an answer immediately. Every topic we learned was more brilliant than the last. I couldn’t wait to be able to finally explore it all.

Within a week we became some of the biggest superstars in the country. The Mercury Seven were known as national heroes. We became the faces of America. Because of this, NASA was very strict about our appearance. They did everything in their power to let the public know that we were the clean-cut, all-American men they wanted to represent their country.

I started wearing a hat every time I went into public so I could pull down to hide my eyes. I couldn’t walk a block without passing a poster with my face on it. The headlines would read “Astronaut Group 1” or “Original Seven” or “Fly Boys” on every one of them, with the seven of us lined up below. As time progressed, the other astronauts and I grew closer. We began to spend time with each other outside of the training facility. I knew their families and their hobbies. I could even call one or two of them my best friends.

Late one morning in early August, I was just waking up. It was one of the first days off we were given since we started working there. I hadn’t slept in that much in years. The moment I stepped out of the shower I heard a knock on the door downstairs.

“One second!” I called out as I slung on my bathrobe and shuffled down the staircase. I opened the door to find a group of three men. They were all dressed in nicely tailored suits and had their hair pressed back against their scalps.

“We’re with Life Magazine. Mind if we have a talk with you, Mr. Adams?” he said in a polite voice.

“Of course, of course,” I responded, holding the door open for them as they waddled into my living room. I was used to news coverage and interviews by then, so this was nothing new. We all took a seat in the living area and one of the men set down a large stack of papers on the coffee table.

“As you know,” the man began, “there are many people in the world that are extremely interested in your life.” I laughed. It never really sunk in that people were that interested in what I did, but for some reason they were.

“We’d like to offer you a contract. Five hundred thousand dollars for exclusive access to your private life.” the man said to me. I couldn’t even respond. I was completely taken aback. That was more money than I had ever dreamed of and these people were offering it to me just for going about my normal routine. I signed the contract immediately, unaware of what it entailed. For the next few months a reporter showed up at my doorstep every few days, just to talk to me and learn what I was up to. I never had anything exciting to say, I just told him about the progress we were making in the program. He seemed completely captivated, as though everything I said was gold. We were making extraordinary progress. In just those first few months that the program had been running, we had already grown closer to sending a man into outer space than ever before.

The first big accomplishment, was when we successfully sent two chimpanzees into space, which was required to check for safety before involving any humans. The next step was to test the first Mercury capsule on a rocket. We all stood on the hillside, staring out over the enormous spaceship stretching out into the sky. It was hard to believe that in just a few weeks we would be inside one of those machines. The countdown sounded and smoke began bellowing out of the monstrous engine. Soon the smoke turned into flames and suddenly the whole rocket burst into a disastrous explosion. We all watched in complete horror. It was that moment when the realization sunk in that this was not going to be a game. We were dealing with one of the most powerful things ever to exist on Earth and that was not to be taken lightly.

In April of 1961, the Mercury Seven program had existed for over a year and things were only getting more serious. President Kennedy became dedicated to beating Soviet Russia in the race to put a man on the moon. He made a promise to the country that this goal would be achieved within the next decade. This was when the real work began. We were no longer doing it for interest and discovery in what was out there, but to protect the name of our country.

One astronaut would be selected for each mission. Every time a new opportunity came around I begged to be chosen, but never was. My good friend, Alan Shepard, was chosen for the first human suborbital flight in May of 1961. I had never seen him that terrified. His whole body was shaking as he stepped out on the platform. He exchanged hugs with everyone of us, not sure if he would ever get to step on the ground again. I will always remember the way he pulled his helmet down over his face and looked us each in the eye. That was when it occurred to me that we were not just a group of astronauts, but a team. Every one of us depended on each other, because there was no one else in the world that understood what we were going through. With every mission another man had to put his life on the line. He had to risk never seeing his children, wife, or friends ever again. There was no turning back now though. We knew what we were a part of and we knew the enormous impact that it would have on the entire world.

I wanted so badly to get the chance to go up into space, but every time I asked, another man was chosen. “Next time, I promise” the chief would tell me, but it never actually happened. Of course I still supported the guy that they did pick. Each mission kept getting more and more advanced. They kept sending men further and further into space. Each time the risk increased. Gus Grissom followed close behind Alan, piloting the *Liberty 7* and marked the beginning of what was known as Project Gemini. This was the final step towards getting mankind on the moon.

Throughout the year of 1962, more spaceships were created and more of us were sent out on the perilous journey into the unknown. The *Friendship 7*, *Aurora 7*, and *Sigma 7* were the names of the spaceships. I wanted more than anything to be the first man to step foot on the moon and I thought I had a good chance at it too. They knew I was the perfect man for the job. I was trained in the specific areas to carry out the mission correctly. However, I never got the chance to even make it into space.

In the month of May 1962, I collapsed in the middle of training. The next thing I remember, I was waking up in a hospital room staring into those same emotionless eyes that I hated so much from before. Every member of the team surrounded my bedside. I felt the pressure of an IV tube in my right arm and the irritating beeping of a machine beside my bed. The beeping never stopped for the next seven years. It was always there, right by my side. The doctor approached me slowly as I became conscious enough to think properly.

“Sir, I am sorry to tell you this, but you have been diagnosed with lung cancer,” he said as though he was reading off a script.

“We are currently seeking the best treatment available and…” he continued on but I stopped listening. I just stared up at the white ceiling. Everything I had put myself through was all for nothing. The excruciating tests, the endless training, the grueling classes were all just so I could one day lie in a hospital bed. I was meant to make history. I was meant to be the first man to ever walk on the moon, but that never happened.

That is where I am now. All the potential I once possessed has faded away over time. Now I just spend my days lying here as the last bit of life still inside of me slowly drains away. But today is the day. It is July 16, 1969. The rocket is set for launch, it is all I hear about on the radio. Three thousand journalists and seven thousand dignitaries cover launchpad 39A in Cape Kennedy, Florida. In the scorching heat, half a million tourists fill the streets with cameras in their hands looking up at the monstrous rocket. The machine is sixteen tons and three-hundred and sixty-three feet tall. Today is the day that they were finally going to make it to the moon.

Suddenly, I hear the machine next to me start to beep faster. My body starts to shake and a sudden pain runs through my heart. Nurses rush in, desperately calling for help. I can’t make out exactly what they were saying, all of my focus is on the radio. They are counting down now.

“Well this day is, I guess our biggest story. We're contemporaries and we covered World War II together and the conflicts since then, and the comings and goings of heads of state. Ten seconds and counting, we are still a go on Apollo 11 at this time.”

“Ten.” A doctor rushes in through the door, desperately running to my bedside. He wraps his hands around my neck and gently lifts up my head. He tries to look into my eyes, but I can’t return the glance. I just keep staring at the floor.

“Nine. Ignition sequence starts.” He sets my head back down. My eyes roll around lifelessly, I have lost all control of my body.

“Eight.” I can hear the crowd cheering through the radio. The excitement in their voices. I imagine their smiling faces spread across the field, all looking up at the giant rocket, preparing to take off.

“Seven.” They bring the defibrillators down on my chest, sending a pulse of electricity through my body.

“Six.” I see the doctor’s look of concern on his face, he rubs his forehead with his thumbs, looking down at my body. He knows there is no hope left for me.

“Five.” The rockets are on now. Enormous bursts of flames engulf the surrounding area, as if the spaceship is showing off its power for the crowd.

“Four.” The nurse pulls back. They have given up. I am gone. The machine next to me beeps faster and faster.

“Three.” My vision begins to fade away, a bright white light engulfs the room, everybody in it disappears.

“Two.” I feel my body growing lighter and lighter, almost as if I am floating off of the table. I soar upward, I know where I am going, it is the place I have always dreamed of reaching one day. And that day has finally come.

“One.”

Attribution of Research

1. “Fifties Fashions Men.” *The Fifties Web*. Ed. Michael Rich. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Feb. 2015.

* Checkered suits were very popular in the 1950s
* Young adults went out to dances, movie theaters, and ice skating rinks for fun in the 1950s.

2. “Magnificent Seven: Life with America’s Mercury Astronauts.” *Life*. Time, n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2015.

* The Mercury Seven were chosen on April 9, 1959
* The Mercury Seven were known as national heroes
* NASA wanted the group to maintain the public view that they were clean-cut and “all-American”
* The Mercury Seven were also referred to as the “Original Seven” or “Astronaut Group 1”
* In August of 1959, the Mercury Seven signed a contract with Life Magazine for $500,000 for exclusive access to their private lives

3. *Man on the Moon - Apollo 11- Cronkite Broadcast Pt3*. *YouTube*. N.p., 22 June 2008. Web. 9 Feb. 2015.

* Walter Cronkite covered the Apollo 11 launch and said “Well this day is, I guess our biggest story. We're contemporaries and we covered World War II together and the conflicts since then, and the comings and goings of heads of state.”

4. NASA Administrator, ed. “In Their Footsteps: The Mercury 7.” *NASA.gov*. U.S. Government, 19 Dec. 2005. Web. 14 Feb. 2015.

* Endless hours of classroom time began immediately after the men were chosen
* In May of 1961, Alan Shepard was the first human suborbital flight
* In July of 1961, Gus Grissom was the second human suborbital flight in the *Liberty 7*

5. “NASA - Mercury Manned Flights Summary.” *NASA.gov*. U.S. Government, 30 Nov. 2006. Web. 14 Feb. 2015.

* In 1962, the *Friendship 7*, *Aurora 7,* and *Sigma 7* were launched into space carrying mercury seven astronauts

6. "NASA - Project Mercury Overview - Astronaut Selection." *NASA*. Ed. Brian Dunbar. NASA, 30 Nov. 2006. Web. 21 Feb. 2015.

* NASA organized their “man-in-space program” on October 7, 1958
* NASA gathered 473 test pilots for review from the navy, marines, and air force
* NASA screened the service records of the pilots in January of 1959
* Out of these pilots 110 met the basic qualifications and taken to Washington, D.C.
* Men in D.C. where interviewed, tested, and asked to volunteer for the mercury project mission
* Candidates for the program could not be over 5 feet 11 inches or weigh over 180 pounds
* 32 men passed the tests in Washington D.C.
* The candidates were brought to Washington D.C. in two groups, and because so many people volunteered in the first group, the second group wasn’t called
* The men that passed tests in Washington D.C. went to Albuquerque, New Mexico for physical examinations
* Those who passed physical examinations went to Wright Air Development Center in Dayton, Ohio
* While in Dayton the men were put through psychological tests and challenges
* A test was to ride a spinning contraption to demonstrate gravity
* After the Dayton tests, seven men were chosen

7. Tiaso, Sunny. *Read You Loud and Clear!* N.p.: CreateSpace Independent, 2014. Print. The NASA History Series.

* The United States had only 53 hours in space, while the Soviet Union had 382 hours in 1963.
* In April of 1961, John F. Kennedy asked Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson if it was possible to beat the Soviets with our space progress.
* In May of 1961, Kennedy received positive results that made it look possible for the U.S. to reach the moon.
* John F. Kennedy promised the country that this would be accomplished in the next decade.

8. “Timeline of Space Exploration.” *Space Chronology*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Feb. 2015.

* Two chimpanzees flew in the spaceships before the astronauts to check for safety
* The first Atlas rocket with a Mercury capsule exploded
* Project Gemini was formally created in January of 1962

9. “Weather History Results for Orlando, FL (32819) July 16th, 1969.” *Farmers’ Almanac*. Almanac Publishing, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2015.

* On the day of the Apollo 11 launch, the high temperature was 91.3 degrees and the average temperature was 81.1 degrees

10. Wilford, John Noble. “Men Walk on the Moon.” *New York Times* [New York, NY] 21 July 1969: n. pag. Print.

* The Apollo 11 spaceship weighed 16 tons and stood 363 feet tall
* Apollo 11 left launching pad 39A in Cape Kennedy, Florida
* The Apollo 11 launch occurred on July 16, 1969
* There were 3,000 journalists at the launch site
* There were 7,000 dignitaries at the launch site
* There were half a million tourists watching Apollo 11 take off

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*Man on the Moon - Apollo 11- Cronkite Broadcast Pt3*. *YouTube*. N.p., 22 June 2008. Web. 9 Feb. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7c-PbfnQuw>.

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“NASA - Mercury Manned Flights Summary.” *NASA.gov*. U.S. Government, 30 Nov. 2006. Web. 14 Feb. 2015. <http://www.nasa.gov/mission\_pages/mercury/missions/manned\_flights.html#.VRo8PzvF8rM>.

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“Timeline of Space Exploration.” *Space Chronology*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Feb. 2015. <http://spacechronology.com/2000s.html#2009>.

“Weather History Results for Orlando, FL (32819) July 16th, 1969.” *Farmers’ Almanac*. Almanac Publishing, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2015. <http://farmersalmanac.com/weather-history/32819/1969/07/16/>.

Wilford, John Noble. “Men Walk on the Moon.” *New York Times* [New York, NY] 21 July 1969: n. pag. Print.